

C&A Grant Hearings Testimony:

Grant #1229: Identifying African American Heritage Resources Statewide

Sponsored by the Montana Historical Society

February 12, 2007

Good Morning Mister Chairman and members of the committee. For the record, my name is Robert E. Harris of Great Falls. I am testifying on behalf of grant # 1229, sponsored by the Montana Historical Society, requesting funding for "Identifying African-American Heritage Resources Statewide."

Two years ago, this committee generously provided \$14,100 to establish a dynamic annotated bibliography and database dedicated to black history resources in Montana.

We are happy to report that Phase 2, "Identifying African American Heritage Resources Statewide" would continue not only the critical research at the Montana Historical Society, but also facilitate information collection throughout the state.

If fully funded, the templates established during Phase I will aid further identification of black history resources available at the Montana Historical Society, make the database accessible through the Montana Historical Society website, and facilitate regional meetings to encourage local groups to identify resources in their communities.

One goal of this project is to bring the black Montanan's experience to a national audience, such as the new Smithsonian Museum of African American History and Culture. The African American presence in the West is under-documented, and usually overlooked. For example the national oral history project, StoryCorps, recently announced its Griot Initiative to collect interviews from at least 1,750 African-Americans. The Initiative will visit locations across the nation, but not in the Northwest or Northern Rockies.

Our work with the 1870 and 1910 census reveals individuals and families who endeavored to establish a better life. We have also noted that in nearly every US census between 1870 and 1940, more blacks lived in Montana than any of the surrounding states. We have yet to learn why Blacks chose to come here, and why they chose to stay.

One reason may have been the vibrant communities, another may have been the economic opportunities – as was the case with the Daniel Brockman, a Kentuckian who left his family farm in Missouri in the 1880s and by 1910 was farming in Dawson County. His son, also named Daniel, was a Montana ranch hand, sheepherder, and a decorated veteran of both World Wars; he was the first African-American resident of the Veterans Home in Columbia Falls. We know there are many more stories like theirs.

We must not lose the momentum we have just gained. We must strengthen the foundation for the study of black heritage in Montana. For all of the reasons given, we strongly believe that full funding of this grant at \$26,170, will benefit all Montanans in perpetuity.

We also would like to comment on the importance of the Montana Cultural Trust and its critical funding to arts and cultural projects across the state. Please support a substantial increase to the corpus of the Trust, so that these projects, so intrinsic to Montana's future, can flourish.

Mr. Chairman and Members of the Committee, I appreciate this opportunity to speak to you on behalf of this very worthy project and thank you very much. Montana Historical Society Director Richard Sims, Project Director Kate Hampton, Cultural Anthropologist Alan Thompson, and historians Patty Dean and Ken Robison are with me, and we will be happy to answer any questions.